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Bloomingdale School District Preps for High-Stakes Testing

Learn how Achieve3000 helped students in the Bloomingdale School District work better with informational text, improve higher-level thinking skills, and prepare for a new national assessment exam.

[Bloomingdale School District](#) was moving to a new national assessment exam, and Kristine Dudlo was concerned.

As the supervisor of curriculum and instruction for the Bloomingdale, NJ district, she was uncertain about how well the district would be able to prepare students for the change from the NJASK (NJ Assessment of Skills and Knowledge) exam to the new Common Core aligned PARCC (Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for Colleges and Careers) exam.

Their fourth graders were already struggling with [language arts](#) testing, and appeared to lack the skills and strategies needed to master testing in past years. In addition, the district had historically focused on student mastery of fictional text, whereas the PARCC test also requires students to master reading and writing around informational text.

"We were moving forward with the PARCC assessment, and needed to do something with state testing and everyday learning to promote higher-level thinking skills, and help students work with informational text," she said.

Without these skills, her students wouldn't have a fighting chance come testing time.

The Search for a Literacy Solution

Kristine began to research solutions that could help increase literacy levels for all of their students, including [English language learners](#) and special education students. During the process, she came across a variety of free literacy and homework program

options that the district considered.

However, she quickly realized that these options required a lot of manual input, which was impractical for their busy teachers and administrators, and in addition, left room for inaccuracies.

Because they were looking for a solution that would be easy for their teachers to use, one area of particular concern was the fact that Lexile reading levels – the measure a student's reading level – would need to be input and updated manually.

"There are free services out there, but you have to preset the Lexiles yourself," she said. "They don't move the students along, and you don't know the quality and accuracy of the information you're giving to students."

She also found that many homework programs did not assess student comprehension very thoroughly.

And when it came to how well materials were aligned to the PARCC test, she added that many companies seemed to simply take their existing materials and claim that they were PARCC and state-aligned without any evidence to back those claims.

Then she discovered Achieve3000.

How Can We Meet the Needs of Every Student?

"We were looking for something to meet the needs of all of our students," said Kristine. "Not only gifted and talented, but special education, mainstream and ELL students. Achieve was able to meet all of those needs for every student."

So, which criteria were most important to Bloomingdale as they assessed various solutions?

Research-Based: "We wanted something that was proven, and research-based," said Kristine. "Achieve has been around for many years. The research is there. I was able to see that it was doing what they say it does."

Standards-Aligned: In assessing Achieve3000, Kristine found that the materials represented the "closest simulation to the PARCC assessment." She also found that the standards-aligned writing component, and the free state-specific bonus lessons really helped moved the students forward.

"The writing component of Achieve3000 is aligned with state assessments, and the bonus lessons are huge," she said. "This is one of the biggest reasons why we went with Achieve3000. It doesn't cut it that the content is standards-aligned – you need to have the research, and Achieve3000 had it in the background."

Ease of Use: With a very brief overview of the solution, Kristine said that even her new teachers caught on very quickly.

"Achieve3000 provides one-stop shopping for even the most inexperienced teachers," she said. "They have resources at their fingertips – standards, instructional guides, lesson models, and writing center. All of these resources just keep getting better."

Flexible Access: Kristine noted that the ability to access Achieve3000 outside of the classroom benefits not only students, but parents and teachers, as well.

"We had a teacher who had to take partial leave, but with Achieve3000 was able to monitor students when not in school," she said.

She also credits Achieve3000 with helping to extend student learning beyond the classroom, citing that 99 percent of students used Achieve3000 after hours.

Affordability: Kristine noted that although Achieve3000 is affordable, they did have to spend on computers, laptop and infrastructure such as updating their wireless connection, in order to support the program.

"We're making it work," she said. "We're ensuring that the funding is there because it has proven to be effective in our district."

Getting Started with Differentiated Reading Instruction

Bloomingdale School District – which began with Achieve3000 four years ago – has two elementary schools for grades PreK-2 and grades 2-4, and one middle school for grades 5-8.

Before implementing Achieve3000, the district had one computer in the 2-4 school, and the middle school was just getting hotspots installed, said Kristine. Now, they have wireless connection, a computer lab and four laptop carts for the middle school, and two computer labs in the 2-4 school, providing more online accessibility.

In addition, all teachers have SMART boards and projectors in their classrooms.

Throughout the Achieve3000 implementation, and after, Kristine was impressed by how quickly Achieve3000 staff responded to their needs.

"The responsiveness of the company is so highly commendable," she said. "They were always able to help us with any glitch we had, and move us forward."

As far as usage in the classroom, Kristine says that one day each week, students complete a mini lesson in Achieve3000 using the Stretch article – which is designed to expose students to higher-level text. Teachers work on strategy with the whole class, and the students then use that strategy as they work on computers and laptops to read

articles at their own pace during class time.

The district also uses Achieve3000 to monitor student Lexiles, she said.

"The reports are so thorough that teachers can see where students are, where they're struggling, and focus on a particular concept to teach," said Kristine. "They can take an article that is fine-tuned with that skill and work with students."

Finally, the district uses Achieve3000 for summer reading – probably one of the biggest impacts they've ever seen for student summer reading, said Kristine.

"The students were assigned three articles by teachers for the next year, and were given their choice of three other articles," she explained. "Every student was reading the same article at their own level. It is so meaningful because they can have that success, no matter what their level."

She added that the summer program also helped their gifted and talented students who were struggling to feel accomplished.

"The summer reading program at Achieve is tremendous!" she commented.

Ensuring Teacher Readiness

Kristine credits the ongoing professional development provided by Achieve3000 staff with preparing teachers to successfully work with the program.

The first year, the Achieve3000 curriculum and implementation manager assigned to their district provided two full days of professional development. In the second year, they had three more training sessions.

"The professional development has been absolutely amazing," said Kristine. "It is so

focused, and so on target. Our trainer asked what teachers needed to work on, and she came in focused and ready to run with them."

For example, they recently had a session on how to analyze reports in order to drive instruction and move students forward.

Kristine also commented that their teachers will be participating in Learning Paths this year. Teachers can easily create personalized or small-group MAP Informed Learning Paths using Achieve3000 lessons, saving planning time and providing targeted skills-based instruction.

Each teacher will have two different Learning Paths to complete in order to prepare for upcoming professional development sessions, she added.

Kristine stressed the importance of including all teachers in the professional development program, and not just those in language arts, explaining that the district had placed a lot of focus on sessions for both social studies and science teachers.

Finally, she noted that the key to keeping teachers up to date with Achieve3000 materials, is to conduct professional development on an ongoing basis.

"Ongoing is necessary, not optional," she said. "Because the program gets better and better each year, the teachers need to continue that professional development."

Students Gain More Self-Confidence, Higher-Level Thinking Skills

Because they've just switched from NJASK to the PARCC assessment, Kristine says they haven't yet compared the scoring of the different assessments, and doesn't have data regarding how Achieve3000 has impacted their test scores; however, she has seen growth in the students' ability to read independently, as well as boosts in student self-

confidence and higher-level thinking skills.

"As students grow with Achieve, their Lexiles increase, as have the levels of the books they choose to read independently," she said.

Kristine has also seen lifts in comprehension levels, as well as increased exposure to non-fiction materials.

"Their levels of comprehension have changed for the better, and the amount of narrative we observed students reading was through the roof," she said.

She's also seen an impact in other [content areas](#) such as math, science and social studies.

"This is a great shift for students," said Kristine. "The PARCC assessment has so much reading – even in math where students need to understand directions and processes. Achieve3000 really lends itself to helping students ensure they're answering the questions that are being asked."

And, for students who in the past may have struggled with context-poor content in generic textbooks, teachers can pull up the context in Achieve3000 so that students can better understand the material.

Kristine credits Achieve3000 with helping her teachers differentiate instruction in the classroom, without eating into the precious few hours they have to spend with their students.

"When you have a class of 22 students with 22 potentially different reading levels, having a product that can meet those varying needs while using the same strategies is invaluable – no money can pay for this.

"And with all of the requirements we have as educators, Achieve3000 is one of the most effective solutions to meeting the needs of *all* of our students."

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